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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 HANOI 000330

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [VM](#)
SUBJECT: IDEOLOGY RESURGENT? THE GENERAL SECRETARY'S NEW
CONCEPT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

REF: A. HANOI 60
[1](#)B. HANOI 142
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Classified By: PolCouns Brian Aggeler. Reasons: 1.4 (b/d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Those with the patience to read General Secretary Nong Duc Manh's recent pronouncements may have noticed something new. Alongside the usual utterances about "peaceful evolution," there is now a further admonition: Cadres must be on guard against the evils of "self-evolution." In other words, while remaining vigilant to the threat of Western-led political change, one must also resist individual moral degradation. Manh's call, reminiscent of past campaigns to embody Ho Chi Minh-style purity, first emerged in his closing speech to the recently concluded Ninth Plenum and has since been picked up by others in the Politburo, including the influential Chair of the CPV Secretariat, Truong Tan Sang. Coming in the wake of the PCI bribery scandal, the slogan ostensibly targets corrupt officials and is timed to influence personnel decisions in advance of the 2011 Party Congress. But, according to Embassy contacts who follow Party politics, the concept of "self-evolution" also represents an ideological shot across the bow to journalists and others whose efforts to expose corruption might threaten Party leadership.

[1](#)2. (C) COMMENT: Abstruse stuff, to be sure, and for the typical agriculturalist, factory worker, or noodle shop owner, it probably doesn't mean much. Still, Manh's warnings are one more sign, together with the elevation of old-school ideologue To Huy Rua to the politburo (ref. A) and the scuttling of plans for the direct election of local People's Committee Chairmen (ref. B), that political liberalization has been put on hold. While this conservative trend predates the global economic downturn, economic uncertainty appears to have further entrenched -- at least for the moment -- a China-style consensus among the top leadership that embraces capitalist economic development but eschews political reform in favor of social "stability." The good news is that the ideological rigidity that Manh's new concept represents is also year-by-year more estranged from Vietnam's young, pragmatic, and increasingly tech-savvy society. END

SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

"PEACEFUL EVOLUTION," AND NOW "SELF-EVOLUTION"

¶3. (C) For more than a decade, Vietnam's leaders have inveighed against "peaceful evolution" (dien bien hoa binh), a term borrowed from Chinese political campaigns of the early 1990s and used to describe incremental Western-led efforts to subvert Communist Party rule. An integral part of the Vietnamese Communist lexicon, the expression is routinely used as a rhetorical sop to conservative elements within the Party and security services. At the same time, it reflects a genuine and surprisingly widespread anxiety that the United States wants to see one-Party rule in Vietnam crumble (albeit slowly and peacefully). It was hardly surprising, then, that CPV General Secretary Nong Duc Manh would refer to "plots," "destructive activities," and "hostile influences" in his speech at the closing session of Ninth Central Committee January 13.

¶4. (C) What was novel was GS Manh's call in the next line for cadres to combat not just peaceful evolution but "self-evolution" as well (tu dien bien). GS Manh reiterated that message following the conclusion of the Plenum. In remarks replayed on the television news, Manh alerted cadres attending a February 12 conference on Party-building to the dangers of self-evolution, which he tied even more explicitly to outside influence. "Hostile forces continue their wicked attempts at peaceful evolution," Manh asserted, noting that these "plots" were now supplemented by attempts to "directly interfere with us internally, to evolve our very selves or make us evolve

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ourselves." The concept has since been picked up by others in the Politburo. At a February 26 conference on propaganda and ideology, for example, the influential Chair of the Party Secretariat, Truong Tan Sang, again spoke of self-evolution as a "reactionary force" to be combated alongside peaceful evolution.

OUR PRECIOUS BODILY FLUIDS, OR IS IT JUST ABOUT CORRUPTION?

¶5. (C) With its dark talk of plots, pernicious influences, and hostile forces, the concept of self-evolution has a certain Dr. Strangelove quality. Dr. Phan Xuan Son, who serves as Vice Director of Politics at Vietnam's school for elite cadre, the Ho Chi Minh Academy, in fact described self-evolution to us as a "virus" infecting the body of the Party. But at its most basic level, the concept marks a renewed focus on personal rectitude, according to Dr. Son and other sources familiar with CPV politics and rhetoric. And the most obvious targets are corrupt officials. The well-connected former editor of the Army Newspaper Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Colonel Tran Nhung, agreed, emphasizing the Manh's use of the term comes at a time when the Party is just beginning to issue guidelines for the recruitment and promotion of cadres in advance of the Eleventh Party Congress in 2011. According to Dr. Son and Colonel Nhung, many in the party's upper reaches -- particularly those with Soviet educations (ref. C) -- sincerely believe that a decline in individual moral standards was a primary cause of the collapse of the Soviet bloc. For many of these older cadres, Manh's exhortations, like the periodic calls to follow the example of Ho Chi Minh, make sense and ring true.

HYPOCRISY, AND WORSE

¶6. (C) For many others, of course, such calls ring hollow. Influential economic reformer Le Dang Doanh, currently with the Institute for Development Studies (IDS),

noted that for all the general talk of corruption at the Ninth Plenum, there was not a single mention of the biggest scandal of the year, the PCI bribery case; nor was the most influential Party member associated with the case, Ho Chi Minh City Party Chairman Le Thanh Hai, punished. The February 11 arrest of the lower-level official directly implicated in the PCI scandal, Huynh Ngoc Si, is largely seen as a result of Japanese pressure, not as a sign that the Party is determined to be more virtuous, according to Colonel Nhung and others, such as Hanoi University Law Professor Hoang Ngoc Giao and the well-connected son of former CPV General Secretary Le Duan, Le Kien Thanh (ref. D). In the absence of an independent judiciary and free press, there are few levers left to the Party if it wants to be seen as serious about corruption, Professor Giao noted; unfortunately, for many talk of self-evolution and the like is seen as empty palaver, particularly when so many leading cadres lead ostentatious lifestyles.

17. (C) Still others take an even more pessimistic view. "Maybe self-evolution is aimed at us," the IDS's Doanh commented ruefully, noting the pressure that his institute, one of a very few truly independent public policy think tanks, has come under recently. Contacts in the journalistic community in particular note that this is a time of heightened anxiety. For many reporters and editors, self-evolution correlates uncomfortably with demands to exercise individual "responsibility" in the stories they cover. Reflecting on the ongoing press crackdown, the former editor of the HCMC Phap Luat (Law) newspaper, Nam Dong, for example, was scornful of Manh's talk of self-evolution, noting that controls of the press remain pervasive. Dong said that both of the senior editors of the Tuoi Tre and Thanh Nien newspapers had long histories of disciplinary measures taken against them prior to their dismissal, and that the PMU 18 reporting represented the "final drop in a full glass of water."

18. (C) Less obvious but equally important is an implied message for potential whistleblowers, as well as law-enforcement cadres investigating corruption. The arrest, for example, of the MPS Chief Inspector who worked

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to expose the business dealings of Danang Party Secretary Nguyen Ba Thanh (ref E) demonstrates that self-censorship -- "responsibility" -- goes well beyond the press. For cadre, the moral is that they should avoid the type of self-evolution that would lead them to think that they, rather than their CPV superiors, can decide when corruption by a senior Party member merits investigation and punishment.

NEW POLITBURO MEMBER AND A RENEWED EMPHASIS ON IDEOLOGY

19. (C) Asked about self-evolution and its implications, several of our contacts emphasized the importance of the decision -- also at the Ninth Plenum -- to elevate the lead CPV official overseeing the agencies responsible for press restrictions, To Huy Rua, to the Politburo. Opinions about Rua vary. Some, such as the Ho Chi Minh Academy's Son and Pham Tien Nhien of the CPV External Relations Commission, characterized Rua as an outstanding Party member whose selection simply marks the natural next step in his career; others portrayed him as a colorless apparatchik. No one, however, considered Rua a reformer. According to Colonel Nhung, Rua had been a protege of the hard-line former CPV General Secretary Le Kha Phieu, and this had in fact delayed Rua's promotion. Dr. Doanh, who served as an advisor to Phieu's arch-rival Vo Van Kiet, described Rua as "tough" ideologically: cautious by nature but inclined to restrict free expression and maintain discipline. A former official in the Vietnam Writer's Association (VWA), author Lai Nguyen An, said that in a recent speech to the VWA, Rua had excoriated writers who strayed from approved topics.

Nguyen Quoc Chinh, a generally cautious reporter for the CPV-affiliated newspaper Hanoi Moi, called Rua a "hammer."

¶10. (C) More significantly, nearly all of our contacts said that the selection of Rua to fill the Politburo's vacant fifteenth spot represents a major boost to the Commission on Propaganda and Education, a bastion of ideological conservatism that Rua has headed since 2006. Duong Trung Quoc, an assertive independent member of the National Assembly, echoed the view of many that the leadership is concerned that economic uncertainty, particularly unemployment (ref. F), could lead to social unrest. This, in turn, has led to an almost reflexive desire to reassert more stringent ideological control. Whatever the motivation, there appears to be a general sense that there is currently little appetite for political liberalization. In HCMC, a prominent businesswoman who is fighting for approval to open a private, non-profit university noted that under Rua's leadership there is no question why "propaganda" comes before "education" in the Commission's title.

CONSERVATIVES, REFORMERS, AND GENERATION BLOG

¶11. (C) Vietnam watchers endlessly speculate about the battle between "reformers" and "conservatives" and who's up and who's down. The fact is, however, that there are no longer any easy dichotomies in Vietnam's elite politics. The economic debates of the 1980s and 1990s have largely been settled, and Vietnam is now institutionally bound to market-oriented policies. But neither is there today a camp pushing aggressively for political reform; those who look to PM Nguyen Tan Dung, for example, to pick up Vo Van Kiet's mantle have been consistently disappointed (and have ignored the current Prime Minister's own background). In the end, the ideological hunkering-down represented by "self-evolution," the promotion of To Huy Rua to the Politburo, and the scuttling of plans for the direct election of local Party chiefs, signifies less a victory for the conservative "faction" than a further entrenchment of a Beijing-style consensus.

¶12. (C) While this is bad news, at least in the short term, for journalists and others hoping for a less restrictive political climate, the silver lining is that the type of old-school ideological sclerosis that GS Manh's concept embodies means increasingly less to the generation of young pragmatists that will determine Vietnam's future. Examples of this can be found among Vietnam's nascent but

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growing blog communities, which continue to seek the outer edge of expression even as they echo the need for individual responsibility. As the renowned international affairs journalist and prominent blogger Huy Duc explained, an increasing percentage of Vietnam's young population finds its news -- and editorial commentary -- online. Duc, like other bloggers, assert that older party leaders remain stuck in the "print mindset" and fail to grasp the importance of the internet for Vietnam's next generation of leaders. With internet penetration in Vietnam reaching 24 percent and growing, the gap will only widen between those pushing against self-evolution and those who might be undergoing it.

¶13. (C) A note on sources: This report draws from recent speeches following the January 5-13 Party Plenum, as well as conversations with Embassy contacts including the Vice Director of Politics at the Ho Chi Minh Academy, Dr. Phan Xuan Son; the former editor of the Army Newspaper Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Colonel Tran Nhung; Institute for Development Studies Senior Economist Le Dang Doanh; Hanoi University Law Professor Hoang Ngoc Giao; the son of former CPV General Secretary Le Duan, Le Kien Thanh; the outgoing Director of the CPV External Relations Commission's

Department for North American and European Affairs, Pham Tien Nhlen; former Vietnam Writer's Association official Lai Nguyen An; Chief Foreign Affairs Editor at the Hanoi Moi newspaper, Nguyen Quoc Chinh; the former editor of Phap Luat newspaper, Nam Dong; and National Assembly Representative Duong Trung Quoc.

¶14. (U) This cable was coordinated with ConGen HCMC.
MICHALAK